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ABSTRACT

This paper presents guidelines for creating a collaborative approach for communication among teachers, parents, and students to plan for their transition toward further education or work in adult life and to become informed self-advocates. Guidelines for teachers are presented and include: (1) establishing a system that places the student at the center of the communication process; (2) using portfolios as a management system for monitoring student growth and progress; (3) helping students learn assessment and conference skills through the practice in the classroom; (4) conducting a conference where students present their portfolios to parents; (5) completing a post-conference reflection on new goals established in collaboration with teacher, parents, and student; (6) informing parents and students on a regular basis about the progress that is being made; (7) encouraging parents to participate in the education of their children as parent/community volunteers; and (8) actively encouraging parents and students to attend and participate in Individualized Education Program meetings. The guidelines describe communication techniques that ensure students are empowered and prepared for their future at the end of high school. A sample middle school daily report and weekly planner is attached. (CR)

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Communication: Teaching Middle Grades Exceptional Students to Become Self-Advocates

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Paper presented at the 88th Annual Convention of the National Rural Education Association, San Antonio, TX, October 11-14, 1996.

Authors' note: Lisa L. Dickens-Wright, Regular and Exceptional Middle Grades Teacher Educator, provided information on her innovative strategies for communication.

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Communication: Teaching Middle Grades Exceptional Students to Become Self-Advocates

Three major, interrelated goals of schooling for teachers of adolescents with learning difficulties are to: (a) help students develop self-regulation, build responsibility for monitoring their own progress, and communicate their accomplishments to parents; (b) increase parent involvement through goal setting, school instruction, home-school collaboration, and shared progress monitoring; and (c) begin the process of planning for transition into post secondary settings no later than the early middle school years. The ultimate objective is to develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually mature individuals while providing a comprehensive and multifaceted curriculum. In what way might these goals be achieved? Communication is the key.

Some years ago while working with children, we developed some guidelines to create a collaborative approach for communication among teachers, parents, and students. We wanted to establish a life-long avenue of support for students who pose a challenge to the school system. We have updated these guidelines with the assistance of a middle grades educator who is currently teaching classes for students who require a regular education and individuals with learning difficulties. She has implemented many of these ideas as practices in her classroom. We believe it is important to begin working toward the major goals as early as possible, certainly no later than the early middle school years.

Guideline 1. Establish a system which places the student at the center of the communication process. "In general, students can be described as self-regulated to the degree that they are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active in their own learning process" (Zimmerman, 1989, p. 329). At the beginning of every school year, term, or semester, introduce parents and students to the concept that adolescents are old enough to take ownership for communication about their own progress. Conferences will now include students because their reflections about their own learning are important and insightful and because the skills of self-regulation, progress monitoring, and communication must be developed through direct participation. To prepare students for participation in conferences, direct involvement in their own learning must be incorporated into classroom procedures on a daily basis. For example, our middle school educator had a student who had several inappropriate behaviors. With the assistance of the teacher, the student first created a chart listing 10 behaviors which were inappropriate. Although all ten behaviors were included on the chart, the student selected only two to be targeted

at one time. The chart was checked by the teacher or her assistant. As weekly goals were achieved, new goals were established until all ten behaviors had been improved. The chart thus became a record of improvement to be used by the student when he was called upon to discuss his goals and his progress with others.

Guideline 2. Use portfolios as a management system for monitoring student growth and progress. A portfolio is "a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection" (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991, p. 60). Students may include any work that demonstrates learning in any area, including behavioral, where there is instruction and assessment (Kasse, 1994; see Abruscato, 1993 for an example of the Vermont Mathematics Portfolio; see Brandt, 1992 for entire issue on using performance assessment; see Wesson & King, 1996 for guidelines on portfolio assessment with students in special education programs). The student referred to in **Guideline 1** was able to monitor his progress daily, and he eventually included the chart in his portfolio as a record of his own progress. The chart was time consuming, however, by the shared responsibility, improvement was possible.

Guideline 3. Help students learn assessment and conference skills through practice in the classroom. A minimum of once per week, portfolios should be discussed by students and teachers. Guidelines should be established to help students (a) assess progress toward their goals in an area, (b) monitor growth by self-comparison, and (c) use self-reflection to adjust future goals. These guidelines may be in the form of questions, checklists, or rating scales to help students understand self-criticism. The same guidelines used to assess the portfolios are included in activities centered around learning conference skills. Students practice discussing their strengths and needs according to their assessment of the portfolios. In discussing their own performance, the students learn how to give themselves feedback which guides their own progress and reinforces the learning of new concepts (Brandt, 1992; Enz & Serafini, 1995; Kasse, 1994; Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer 1991; Wesson & King, 1996). In order to discuss portfolios with each student, a teacher can develop a weekly activity which requires students to work independently. Our teacher-educator, had a scheduled week-day event, such as D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything And Read). During this time, as well as during library time, she discussed individual portfolios with each student.

Guideline 4. Conduct a conference where students present their portfolios to parents. Conference dates are generally designated on most school calendars. The weekly planner (explained in Guideline 6) may be utilized to remind both students and parents of the upcoming conference times which are held during the day and evening at school.

> The purpose of this conference is for all three interested parties to come to a better understanding of the student as a self-directed, responsible, unique learner. Each participant comes to the conference with specific concerns and roles. Parents come with questions about their child's academic and social progress. Teachers contribute their knowledge about each child's development and provide documented observations about the child as a learner and member of the classroom community. Students share materials from their portfolios and discuss their perspectives about their classroom performance. During the three-way conference, the teacher serves as facilitator and supportive commentator. When students take the "spotlight," they also assume greater responsibility for themselves as learners. (Enz & Serafini, 1995, p. 97)

Guideline 5. Complete a post conference reflection on new goals established in collaboration with teacher, parents, and student. All three parties are recognized as equal partners in defining and creating objectives by developing a mutual plan of action for the next term based upon the school and home learning environment. It is an ideal time for discussing how the home environment can complement and reinforce the work accomplished at school. These reflections should be based on both written and verbal feedback from all parties. New goals should be created and implemented. In our teacher-educator's classroom, goals were written that all parties agreed upon. If there was any disagreement, student goals were negotiated and given top priority. Teacher and parent goals were always included, as well, but time lines for completion were negotiated to address all concerns.

Guideline 6. Inform parents and students on a regular basis about the progress that is being made. Currently, our teacher-educator communicates with parents and students in the following ways. (a) The daily report (see Figure 1) allows for constant and consistent communication. It also gives both parents and students an idea of daily behavior and academic performance. A section of this report provides an opportunity for additional comments from teachers, students, and parents. For example, written concerns presented during portfolio conferences were also included on daily reports. (b) The weekly planner (see Figure 2) is the

most efficient means of communication. Students and parents gain insight on objectives for the upcoming week, in-class assignments, homework assignments, project due dates, as well as report due dates, etc. Students and parents use the weekly planner as a means for checking homework assignments and as a method for keeping up with classroom agenda. The teacher is responsible for completing the weekly planner. Friday was the best day for our teacher-educator because she could reflect on weekly accomplishments. This allowed her to project a teaching schedule for the upcoming week. Although it adds to an already busy day, the weekly planner frees planning time for the next week. (c) A maximum of eight different parents receive telephone calls during a week. A minimum of three of these discussions must be reports of excellence about students. (d) Sometimes it is impossible to reach parents by telephone. Therefore, it is necessary to make home visits to get insight on the students' environment outside of the school setting. Our teacher-educator was fortunate to have a principal that understood the importance of home visits. She was able to fit these visits in during teacher workdays and was often accompanied by her assistant. Visits are used to inform parents of academic and social progress.

Guideline 7. Encourage parents to participate in the education of their children as parent/community volunteers. Many parents will take an active role in the education of their children if they know how they can contribute. Another benefit of telephone calls and home visits is that teachers have an opportunity to learn about parents' jobs, hobbies, and other areas of expertise. Parents can then provide input on units of discussion to be assigned as projects to students, as well as introduce students to various types of employment. During a nine-week period, in our teacher-educator's classroom, a minimum of three parent/community volunteers were invited to share in the education of students. At the beginning of the year, as an exploratory activity, students were divided up into groups of two. Each student drew a picture of the parents' occupation (or they drew something that their parents could do well). Next, team members guessed the illustrated activity. The information was then compiled and used as a reference. A parent who was an extraordinary cook taught the students how to prepare a delicious dessert. A community member taught basic architectural designs and patterns.

Guideline 8. Actively encourage parents and students to attend and participate in IEP meetings. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is another form of communication. A team of the student's teacher or teachers, parents, and other school personnel such as a school psychologist or exceptional education supervisor, along with the student when

possible, meet to decide on particular goals that should be achieved by the student during a school year. Although parents are always invited to participate, that invitation is often perfunctory. It is important that parents be actively encouraged to attend and that their input be directly solicited by telephone calls, written notices, and encouragement from their children. From the beginning of the year, student participation becomes an integral part of classroom procedures; therefore, students will attend and participate in all conferences. The tone needs to convey the expectation that parents and students are members of the team, not merely outsiders who are being allowed to sit in on the meeting.

In summary, these eight guidelines help students to plan for their transition toward further education or work in adult life and to become informed self-advocates. Since learning difficulties are not limited to the school years, adolescents with learning problems and their parents need to consider their postsecondary options---college, vocational, technical schooling or a job. As required by law, at age 16, the IEP must state transitional services needed by students with a specific learning disability to move them forward in life. The difficulty is that by the time students reach age 16, many decisions have been made along the way that limit these options. Parents and students are often surprised to learn that twelve or more years of schooling will not result in a regular high school diploma, either because students have not taken the necessary courses or because they are unprepared to pass exit exams. Failure to have a regular diploma can bar entrance to college or university. These guidelines describe communication techniques which insure that there are no surprises at the end of high school. IEP meetings and teacher-student-parent conferences can be used to develop realistic goals for student progress, as well as to explore long-range expectations. From middle school on, the implications of decisions about course selection and curriculum modifications must be made clear to students and parents. By using portfolios of actual student work, all parties can participate in setting goals, assessing progress toward those goals, and reflecting on how appropriate those goals were in the first place. This process, begun early, can help avoid unrealistically high expectations for some students as well as encourage those for whom extra effort may make college a possibility.

Postsecondary institutions, whether academic, technical, or vocational, report a low level of understanding among students and their parents regarding differences in the nature of services once students finish high school. Students at the postsecondary level are required to take responsibility for documenting any disability and requesting appropriate services. Unlike in their previous school

setting, they will now be expected to self-advocate. Most students are completely unprepared to do this. In fact, it is unusual to find students who can speak knowledgeably about their own learning problems. It is, therefore, essential that students begin early to explore and understand their own strengths, needs, and motivation. After years of self-monitoring through portfolio building, students achieve a much higher level of self-awareness; and after years of teacher-student-parent conferences in which students take the lead, they are much more able to communicate their strengths, needs, goals, and progress toward those goals. By viewing communication as more than "teacher-talk about grades", partnerships may be formed between school and home to empower students with learning difficulties to become productive and meaningful members of society. These guidelines have addressed this view of communication (see Guskey, 1996 for book on communicating student learning).

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Figure 1

MIDDLE SCHOOL DAILY REPORT

STUDENT: _____ ***DATE:** _____

TEACHER: _____ **CLASS:** _____

***Please return report on the next school day.**

BEHAVIORS	**RATING**
1. Follows instructions cooperatively.	0 1 2 3 4 5
2. Stays on task.	0 1 2 3 4 5
3. Works quietly.	0 1 2 3 4 5
4. Completes assignments.	0 1 2 3 4 5
5. Remains in assigned area.	0 1 2 3 4 5

RATING KEYS:

0 = very poor
1 = poor
2 = fair
3 = good
4 = very good
5 = EXCELLENT!

TEACHER COMMENTS, Signature _____ **Date:** _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

STUDENT COMMENTS, Signature _____ **Date:** _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

PARENT COMMENTS, Signature _____ **Date:** _____

_____

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Figure 2

WEEKLY PLANNER

Week of _____ to _____, 199___

OBJECTIVE	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Language Arts: _____ _____ _____ _____					
Mathematics: _____ _____ _____ _____					
Science: _____ _____ _____ _____					
Social Studies: _____ _____ _____ _____					

CODES:

IC - In class assignment
HW - Homework assignment
WS - Worksheet practice
PR: Project assignment
PA: Parental assistance required
UE: Upcoming events

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